Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Mr. Ford's Advisers: Gen. Haig Must Go

An urgent feeling by President Ford's closest aides that Gen. Alexander Haig must be removed as his chief of staff soon—perhaps immediately—hit fever pitch in two backstage developments last Thursday.

Development No. 1: Haig entered the Oval Office with a commission for Mr. Ford to sign nominating Pat Buchanan, Richard M. Nixon's longtime political adviser and speechwriter, as ambassador to South Africa. Despite Haig's fervent arguments, the President delayed his decision.

Development No. 2: The General Services Administration was instructed by Haig deputy Jerry Jones to move furniture into two Executive Office Building suites next door to the White House for two ex-Nixon aides now in San Clemente: Room 352 for ex-press secretary Ron Ziegler; Room 348 for ex-appointments secretary Steve Bull.

Mr. Ford's own aides were thunderstruck. They view Buchanan as the symbol of bloody-nose Nixon politics who undercut Mr. Ford as Vice President and who now should be removed from government, not promoted to an embassy. As for Ziegler, he is the bad old days incarnate who, they vow, will never be permitted to return to White House premises even to clean up files.

Haig's successes in the vicious rivalry now swirling around the Oval Office have led the thin line of totally loyal Ford aides to a grim conclusion. "The White House staff run by Haig is still functioning in the interests of Richard Nixon and the walking wounded of a lost war," one Ford man told us.

"Haig entered the Oval Office with a commission for Mr. Ford to sign nominating Pat Buchanan as ambassador to South Africa."

Post 9/8/74

That interpretation makes suspect Haig's private recommendation to the new President for leniency to the old. Though their concern for Mr. Ford may distort their view, these aides believe Haig must share responsibility for inaccurate information given Mr. Ford a month ago that Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski had agreed the White House tapes were Nixon's legal property.

If Haig indeed has put Nixon and his former aides above an undivided allegiance to President Ford, it is indefensible. Beyond residual loyalties, he is also playing the politicized general—warning of right-wing Republican discontent, fighting the President's position on Vietnam amnesty, undercutting Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger.

Even Haig's roughest critics concede his uniquely indispensable service to the nation in facilitating Nixon's resignation, thanking heaven it was Al Haig rather than Ron Ziegler to whom Nixon gave unprecedented power. That is why Mr. Ford and his aides publicly and genuinely praised Haig in the early transition period. But these same aides now insist Haig must go.

Having served as de facto President in the final months of Nixon's agony, Haig continued to wield awesome power—greater than many past Presidents—after the Ford succession. In his early days as President, Mr. Ford signed the commission for one presidential appointment given him—Nixon style—by Haig with no Ford man even knowing it. That Haig was fulfilling a commitment to his old boss is no excuse.

One incident a month ago convinced some Ford aides that Haig was not in tune with the new President's own interests. He failed to warn Mr. Ford that six hidden microphones, though disconnected, remained in the Oval Office, theoretically a potential for bugging the President. They were not removed until a week after Mr. Ford's Aug. 12 pledge there would be no more electronic eavesdropping in the White House.

On a more trivial level, Haig ignored Mr. Ford's desire to replace portraits in the Cabinet room of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson (Nixon favorites) with Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman (Ford favorites) until brought to his attention a third time.

Coincidentally, Lincoln and Truman were Mr. Ford's models in post-war amnesty grants. When Haig learned belatedly en route to Chicago for the Aug. 19 VFW convention that the President would propose amnesty, he protested and prophesied — inaccurately — that the veterans would boo him. Since then, Ford aides charge, Haig has funnelled anti-amnesty sentiment into the Oval Office and overemphasized the strength of protests from the Republican right.

They also believe Haig worked up Mr. Ford about Secretary Schlesinger's safeguards against military takeover during the changing of the Presidents. They say Haig, indignant over criticism of the military, was the angry one —not the President.

Detailed memos from Haig's staff suggesting what Mr. Ford should say and do every hour of the day, a system built by H. R. Haldeman for Nixon, are viewed as "insulting and demeaning" by one Ford insider. These memos reach the President just before an event, somehow bypassing veteran Ford aide Robert Hartmann until too late.

Hartmann and a handful of Ford men simply cannot compete with the Haig system. Thus, they feel President Ford must cut loose Al Haig. "Until that happens," one aide said, "the President will be the Prisoner of Zenda in his own house."

© 1974, Field Enterprises, Inc.